

CHAPTER
3

Section 3

AMERICAN LIVES

Jonathan Edwards

Intellectual Man of the Spirit

"When sinners hear of hell's torments, they sometimes think with themselves: Well, if it shall come to that, . . . I will bear it as well as I can. . . . [but when they are in hell], they will not be able to keep alive any courage, any strength, any comfort, any hope at all." —Jonathan Edwards, "The Future Punishment of the Wicked" (1741)

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) was a profound thinker and a deeply emotional believer in the power of God. Thus, his beliefs in both a freely reasoned and personal discovery of God questioned traditional authority and put him in league with two great movements of the 1600s and 1700s—the Enlightenment and the Great Awakening.

The only son of eleven children, Edwards was an excellent student interested in science and the spirit. He attended Yale College at thirteen and after graduation studied theology. In 1726, his grandfather, a Puritan minister, chose Edwards as his assistant pastor in Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards preached there until 1750, when he moved to Stockbridge for a few years. Shortly after being named president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton) in 1757, he was inoculated against smallpox, developed a fever, and died.

Edwards was disciplined. At age twenty, he wrote seventy resolutions for his life. Each day, he arose at 4:00 a.m. and spent thirteen hours in study, thought, and writing. Lacking physical strength, he had tremendous mental and spiritual energy. As a biographer notes, "The real life of Jonathan Edwards was the life of the mind."

In his late teens, Edwards had a profound religious experience in which he perceived the glory of God and the insignificance of humans. He wished "to lie low before God, as in the dust; that I might be nothing, and that God might be all, that I might become as a little child."

Before this event, Edwards had rejected the old Puritan idea that God had absolute authority over the fate of people. Afterwards, this idea became central to his thought. His preaching and writing had three common themes: the glory and magnificence of God, the horrors of hell that awaited sinners who did not repent, and the need for people to undergo a conversion experience.

"A true love of God," he wrote, "must begin with a delight in his holiness, and not with a delight

in any other attribute; for no other attribute is truly lovely without this." He later called God the supreme artist who expressed his majesty with infinite variety.

Understanding the essential evil in human nature preceded conversion and the acceptance of God. Edwards believed that to be saved, each person had to feel God's majesty, just as he had done. Supporting this belief was his wife's deeply emotional religious feeling. Edwards used her spiritual life as a yardstick for measuring that of others. He also said that religious feeling had to be accompanied by understanding; true belief joined spirit and mind. Edwards argued that humans have the freedom to choose whether or not to accept God and that they must take responsibility for their choice.

Edwards's preaching stirred a religious revival in Massachusetts and Connecticut: at one point, the area counted thirty conversions a day. Eventually the fervor died down, however. His insistence on a profound religious experience put Edwards in opposition to the religious authorities of his time. Puritanism had softened, emphasizing good work, and for this reason Edwards was dismissed from the Northampton church. Still, his stress on religious feeling contributed to a religious revival for a couple of decades, and his ideas resurfaced during another Great Awakening in the nineteenth century.

Questions

1. What does the opening quotation say about the relationship of humans to God?
2. Do you think Edwards's beliefs strengthen or undermine authority?
3. How do Edwards's beliefs reflect the ideas of both the Great Awakening and the Enlightenment?